

A \$500,000 weekend

By Jamie Haig
16th Special Operations Wing

In the cool of the morning, 200 Airmen surrounded the prayer tower, heads bowed, as eight names were read.

Eight names. Eight heroes. The eight men of Operation Eagle Claw.

It was a secret mission aimed at rescuing the 53 Americans being held hostage at the U.S. Embassy in Iran when the mission was aborted at the last minute due to mechanical problems with one of the crew's helicopters. Eight special operations members died when another helicopter collided with an EC-130 transport plane at the mission's desert rendezvous point.

The 200 Airmen were here to remember those who went before them and to commemorate the 25th Anniversary of Eagle Claw with a 5k run. All proceeds from the run go to the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, which started as a result of Operation Eagle Claw. Of the 200 hundred runners, four were the original Eagle Claw team members.

"Every time we get together, it's to remember," said retired Colonel Kenneth Poole, one of the original Eagle Claw members. "It's about the children. There were 17 children left behind from these eight men. We had to take care of them."

Special Operations Warrior Foundation was born.

Ross Perot was one of the first major contributors to the SOF Warrior Foundation, setting the standard for future donations. When retired Colonel John Carney took the helm of the foundation, things skyrocketed. He recruited donations from all spectrums, such as professional golfer, Tiger Woods, who donated \$50,000 because his father was Special Forces or the two professional women's golfers who donate every time they make a birdie on tour.

"The SOF Warrior Foundation is a wonderful charity because it's not just about the children," said Bucky Burris, another original member of Eagle Claw. "It's about knowing your children will be taken care of should something happen to you. We could concentrate on the mission because a heavy burden was taken off our backs."

Almost \$500,000 was raised over the past weekend between the 5k race, the golf tournament and the celebratory dinner. There have been 442 deaths of special operators since Eagle Claw and 544 children whose futures depend on the foundation.

"There was a 34 percent increase in the Combined Federal Campaign from Hurlburt Field alone," said Steve McLeary, executive director of the SOF Warrior Foundation. "A total of \$975,000 was raised through CFC worldwide to help the children. The support from the troops is what makes this happen."

Right now, 89 children attend college and by fall, the number is expected to be more than 100. The foundation pays for everything – the tuition, books, room and board - until they are finished with school.

"We contact the family approximately 30 days after a mishap. We offer grief counseling and have a psychologist on staff to help any of the family members," McLeary said. "We try to be an extended family to them. From birthday and Christmas cards every year, to offering guidance on schooling, grants, whatever they need. They know they are part of our family forever. It's a privilege to go to work each day knowing we can help these children."

The top three teams were: Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command, first place; 720th Special Tactics Group, second place; and 16th Special Operations Wing Headquarters; third place.

The top three individuals were: 1st Lt. Michael Lilly, 505th Combat and Control Wing, first place; Kenneth Eckman, from Alabama, second place, Senior Airman Christopher Huntington, 16th Component Maintenance Squadron, third place.

"It was a great run, a great morning. Even when you're hurting, you remember why you are out here today. If they could do it for us, we can do it for them," said Senior Master Sgt. Lisa Haggett, a participant from HQ AFSOC.

"Our current capability, our daily foundation that is special operations, was born of that event," said Colonel Steven Schaick, 16 SOW Chaplain. "Touched by their knowledge and dedication, their standards were set high and paid for in blood. Let us not forget they had the guts to try."



Country musician Travis Tritt performs at the Warrior Foundation's 25th Anniversary Dinner.